



## Questions and Answers from Friends of the Common Forum 2025

*KS - Kim Strawbridge, Reserves Manager, Pebblebed Heath Conservation Trust*

*RC - Rob Coventry, Head of Forestry and Reserves*

*RL - Rick Lockwood, Otter Estuary Ranger*

*SB - Sam Bridgewater, Director of Environment Strategy and Evidence*

### **Q1. When will Uphams Wood Car Park open?**

*KS: Uphams car park will no longer be open to the public and will instead be used by military vehicles with the car park also able to accommodate coach parking. Keeping larger vehicles and MOD usage separate from the public helps ensure that all the other car parks are safer with reduced conflict associated with blocking. Along with the old Estuary View and the Frying Pans car parks, both of which have been closed to the public because of ongoing anti-social behaviour and high levels of fly-tipping, we do retain the option to open car park barriers at busy times in future if required or to use them as parking for specific events.*

### **Q2. Will any further bird hides be built?**

*KS: There are no plans to build further bird hides on the Otter Estuary Reserve at the moment. The previous roofed structures did occasionally suffer from vandalism. During the designing of LORP the decision was to have more, smaller and open hides, creating the nice functional network we have today, with each hide sited where we thought there was likely to be high wildlife interest in future. As the site and its habitats are still developing, we didn't want to invest heavily in larger structures that might be in the wrong place. In the future we may consider more hides (and whether these should be a roofed design or not) when the Estuary reaches an ecological equilibrium, and we know where the best place to locate any new structures might be to provide the best wilding viewing experience. This is likely to take a few years.*

### **Q3. What can you tell us about the otters? Do you know of any significant changes in their behaviour since many more humans visit the Project?**

*RL: We know that there are otters and that they're doing well. They are very territorial, so we think that there's a single family on the reserve. Lots of people are seeing them regularly, and they seem to cope with visitors.*

*SB: There's also a healthy otter population near Newton Poppleford. We're working with Exeter University to study them – this work suggests they're doing well, and results will be published in due course.*

### **Q4. How long will it take for a mature saltmarsh to develop at the Otter Estuary?**

*RL: It will take about 3-5 years after the breach (which was September 2023) to fully mature, at which point we'll see clearly defined zonal areas of difference between mudflat, lower salt marsh and upper salt marsh.*

**Q5. As there is now more frequent inundation at high water following the works done on Otter Estuary footpaths, what is being done to monitor and protect the long-established trees and shrubs from the effects of salt water on their root systems? The large oaks on the high bank at the end of the Granary Lane gardens seem particularly vulnerable.**

*SB: An increase in salinity as the site transitions to inter-tidal habitats will affect some trees. The small number of trees that we believed might be impacted and die were removed in advance of the project with many thousands planted in compensation. In the absence of LORP we believe the embankment would have breached catastrophically without any management of the process. We will continue to monitor all remaining trees associated with the site and manage as necessary. Regular tree inspections are undertaken by our Forestry and Reserves Team. Safety checks are especially important when trees are over a public right of way.*

**Q6. How do you manage the river in light of beavers and floods?**

*SB: The River Otter is pretty dynamic, so the question is always, how do we deal with that? Where do we intervene? When? Why? How? Rivers want to move and breathe. Our preference always favours letting the river (and the beavers!) behave naturally with as little intervention as possible, but sometimes we do intervene. For example, we will remove beaver dams if they threaten to flood infrastructure.*

**Q7. If there are water voles on the reserves, what does that mean about the presence of mink?**

*KS: There is no evidence of mink on the Heaths. There are refuges where water vole exist. If we can locate and protect them, then we can help them disperse. I have seen this in other places where I've worked*

*SB: There may be some mink in the main river, maybe 1 or 2, but mink don't like otters and there is a healthy otter population. We are aiming to eradicate this and other invasive species in the course of the delivery of the Heaths 2 Sea project. We are still building our understanding of water vole populations on the Pebblebed Heaths and on the tributaries of the River Otter and have used various methods (e.g. detecting various field signs), including using a [water vole detection dog](#). Based on this we believe there are water vole in these locations but our understanding of exactly where and how large the populations are is still poor.*

**Q8. Who is responsible for the Dotton Farm pedestrian bridge? What's the timeline for sorting that?**

*SB: The Estate is not responsible for that bridge; this rests with Devon County Council Highways. The cost of repairs will likely be significant – about £50-100K as a best guess – to replace what was there. However, the river is very actively moving in that location and is likely to quickly outflank any new bridge placed in the same location. It is possible to use artificial armouring of the riverbanks with stone to reduce the risk of this happening, but this would have to be done for a significant stretch upstream which would be very expensive. It may be*

that DCC don't have the funds to do this given other priorities and bridges that need replacing elsewhere. However, the EA's long-standing Dotton gauging station is also at risk of being outflanked in the same location (just downstream). They may decide they want to protect this because the data it records is so valuable. If they choose to do this there may be an opportunity to also build a new footbridge across the protected structure. The decision regarding a way forward currently rests with DCC and the EA and the Estate will support as requested. This might not be a quick fix.

#### **Q9. Are you creating jobs through Heaths 2 Sea?**

*SB: There are two ways to think about that question.*

*1) Jobs created through the delivery of the H2S project itself which include the employment of project manager/support officer, but also the commissioning of background studies/surveyors, etc. None of the funding of the development phase goes to the Estate and is being recycled in the economy.*

*2) Jobs created through the outcomes of H2S –such as diversifying farming opportunities/making farms more economically resilient/improved tourism with jobs in B&Bs local eateries, etc. We don't yet have a figure of the economic benefit and how these might measure as FTE roles.*

#### **Q10. What can be done about shooting parties near the river?**

*SB: It is legal to have a shoot, and shooting takes place on farmland near the river. This is usually pheasant shooting and these are relatively small-scale. This isn't something we are looking to stop but we are keen to encourage all shoots to be exemplars of best practice for supporting wildlife. For example, if a mix of grains is grown for the feed crops (quinoa, cereals etc.) rather than just maize, then that encourages greater biodiversity and better food for wildlife. In winter, some of the highest density of wild birds can be found in cover crops planted to support the shoot. Can we stop these shoots? No. But can they add wildlife value? Yes, if managed well.*

#### **Q11. Are there any red squirrels in the area? Any comments on the grey squirrel situation? [SB introduced Rob Coventry, Head of Forestry and Reserves]**

*RC: Managing grey squirrels was a real passion of my predecessor John Wilding. We control grey squirrel in three woods: Woodbury, Hayes, and near the Rolle Estate Office. I am very interested in the environments in our landscapes. It's very difficult to exercise control over grey squirrel, but I am very much committed to trying. The presence of grey squirrels is problematic if you want to plant broadleaf trees as new plantings can be decimated by squirrel feeding activity. It's a real problem and as of yet there is no viable landscape-scale answer. There are no red squirrels that we are aware of in the Estate.*